

The signature of the first stars in atomic hydrogen at redshift 20

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Dark and baryonic matter moved at different velocities in the early Universe, which strongly suppressed star formation in some regions¹. This was estimated² to imprint a large-scale fluctuation signal of about 2 mK in the 21-cm spectral line of atomic hydrogen associated with stars at a redshift of 20, although this estimate ignored the critical contribution of gas heating due to X-rays^{3,4} and major enhancements of the suppression. A large velocity difference reduces the abundance of halos^{1,5,6} and requires the first stars to form in halos of about a million solar masses^{7,8}, substantially greater than previously

expected^{9,10}. Here we report a simulation of the distribution of the first stars at $z = 20$ (cosmic age of ~ 180 Myr), incorporating all these ingredients within a 400 Mpc box. We find that the 21-cm signature of these stars is an enhanced (10 mK) fluctuation signal on the 100-Mpc scale, characterized² by a flat power spectrum with prominent baryon acoustic oscillations. The required sensitivity to see this signal is achievable with an integration time of a thousand hours with an instrument like the Murchison Wide-field Array¹¹ or the Low Frequency Array¹² but designed to operate in the range of 50–100 MHz.

The relative velocity between the dark matter and baryons also reduces the gas content of each halo. Previous work² assumed that this reduces star formation, but it mainly affects smaller halos that do not form stars^{13,14}. Another critical issue for observations of early stars is timing, since on the one hand, early times bring us closer to the primeval era of the very first stars^{9,10,15,14}, but on the other hand, the cosmological 21-cm signal is obscured by the foreground (mainly Galactic synchrotron), which is brighter at longer wavelengths (corresponding to higher redshifts). Unlike the fluctuations at $z \sim 20$ from inhomogeneous gas heating, previously considered sources² produce smaller fluctuations and are likely to be effective only at $z \sim 30$ ¹⁶.

We use a hybrid method to produce realistic, three-dimensional images of the expected global distribution of the first stars. We use the known statistical properties of the initial perturbations of density and of the relative dark matter to baryon velocity to generate a realistic sample universe on large, linear scales. Then, we calculate the stellar content of each pixel using analytical models and the results of small-scale numerical simulations. In this approach we build upon previous hybrid methods used for high-redshift galaxy formation^{1,2,17}, and include a fit¹⁴ to recent simulation results on the effect of the relative velocity^{7,8} (for further details, see Supplementary Information section S1). Note that numerical simulations (even if limited to following gravity) cannot on their own cover the full range of scales needed to find the large-scale distribution of high-redshift galaxies¹⁸.

We assume standard initial perturbations (e.g., from a period of inflation), where the density and velocity components are Gaussian random fields. Velocities are coherent on larger scales than the density, due to the extra factor of $1/k$ in the velocity from the continuity equation that relates the two fields (where k is the wavenumber). Indeed, velocity fluctuations have significant power over the range $k \sim 0.01 - 0.5 \text{ Mpc}^{-1}$, with prominent BAOs¹.

We find a remarkable cosmic web (Fig. 1), reminiscent of that seen in the distribution of massive galaxies in the present universe^{19,20,21}. The large coherence length of the velocity makes it the dominant factor (relative to density) in the large-scale pattern. The resulting enhanced structure on 100 Mpc scales becomes especially notable at the highest redshifts (Fig. 2). This large-scale structure has momentous implications for cosmology at high redshift and for observational prospects. As the first stars formed, their radiation (plus emission from stellar remnants) produced feedback that radically affected both the intergalactic medium and the character of newly-forming stars. Prior to reionization, three major transitions are expected due to energetic photons. Lyman- α photons couple the hyperfine levels of hydrogen to the kinetic temperature and thus make possible 21-cm observations of this cosmic era, while X-rays heat the cosmic gas³. Meanwhile, Lyman-Werner (LW) photons dissociate molecular hydrogen and eventually end the era of primordial star formation driven by molecular cooling²², leading to the dominance of larger halos (which are more weakly affected by the relative velocities). Due to the strong spatial fluctuations in the stellar sources¹⁸, these radiation backgrounds are inhomogeneous and should produce rich structure in 21-cm maps^{23,4,16,24}.

These radiation backgrounds have effective horizons on the order of 100 Mpc, due to redshift, optical depth, and time delay effects. Thus, the relative velocity effect on the stellar distribution leads to large-scale fluctuations in the radiation fields. This substantially alters the feedback environment of the first stars, making it far more inhomogeneous than previously thought. Observationally, these degree-scale fluctuations will affect various cosmic radiation

backgrounds, and in particular the history of 21-cm emission and absorption (Fig. 3), which depends on the timing of the three radiative transitions. Although it is still significantly uncertain, the 21-cm coupling due to Lyman- α radiation is expected to occur rather early, with the X-ray heating fluctuations occurring later and likely overlapping with significant small-halo suppression due to LW radiation (see Supplementary Information section S3 and Fig. S1). Thus, we focus on the fluctuations due to X-ray heating at redshift 20, assuming that Lyman- α coupling has already saturated while bracketing the effect of the LW flux by considering the two limiting cases where the LW transition has either not yet begun or has already saturated.

Fluctuations on large scales are easier to observe, since 21-cm arrays rapidly lose sensitivity with increasing resolution²⁵. For fixed comoving pixels, going from $z = 10$ to $z = 20$ increases the thermal noise per pixel by a factor of 30 (in the power spectrum), but this is more than compensated for if the required comoving resolution is 4 times lower than at $z = 10$. In the case of negligible LW flux, the relative velocity effect boosts the power spectrum on a scale of $2\pi/k = 130$ Mpc ($0^\circ66$ at $z = 20$) by a factor of 3.8, leading to 11 mK fluctuations on this scale and an overall flat power spectrum with a prominent signature of BAOs (Fig. 4). If, on the other hand, the LW transition has already saturated, the power spectrum is even higher (e.g., 13 mK on the above scale) due to the dominance of larger halos (characterized by efficient atomic cooling) that are more highly biased; in this case, the effect of the streaming velocities is suppressed, reducing the oscillatory signature and steepening the power spectrum. We thus predict a strong, observable signal from heating fluctuations, regardless of the precise timing of the LW transition, with the signal’s shape indicating the relative abundance of small versus large galaxies.

In general, the 21-cm fluctuation amplitude at a given redshift can be reduced by making galactic halos less massive (and thus less strongly clustered) or by increasing the X-ray efficiency (thus heating the cosmic gas past the temperature range that affects the 21-cm emission).

Thus, the characteristic shape that we predict is essential for resolving this degeneracy and allowing a determination of the properties of the early galaxies. Moreover, similar observations over the full $\Delta z \sim 6$ redshift range of significant heating fluctuations could actually detect the slow advance of the LW feedback process, during which the power spectrum continuously changes shape, gradually steepening as the BAO signature weakens towards low redshift.

The exciting possibility of observing the 21-cm power spectrum from galaxies at $z \sim 20$ should stimulate observational efforts focused on this early epoch. Such observations would push well past the current frontier of cosmic reionization ($z \sim 10$, $t \sim 480$ Myr) for galaxy searches²⁶ and 21-cm arrays²⁵. Detecting the remarkable velocity-caused BAO signature (which is much more prominent than its density-caused low-redshift counterpart²⁷) would confirm the major influence on galaxy formation of the initial velocity difference set at cosmic recombination. Measuring the abundance of $10^6 M_\odot$ halos would also probe primordial density fluctuations on ~ 20 kpc scales, an order of magnitude below current constraints. This could lead to new limits on models with suppressed small-scale power such as warm dark matter²⁸.

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Supplementary Information is linked to the online version of the paper at www.nature.com/nature.

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Figure 1: The effect of relative velocity on the distribution of star-forming halos at $z = 20$.

A two-dimensional slice (thickness = 3 Mpc) of a simulated volume of 384 Mpc (comoving) on a side at $z = 20$. To illustrate the previous expectations we show the overdensity (i.e., the relative fluctuation in density; **b**) and the relative fluctuation of the gas fraction in star-forming halos with the effect of density only (**d**). To illustrate the new predictions we show the magnitude of the relative baryon to dark-matter velocity (**a**), and the relative fluctuation of the gas fraction in star-forming halos including the effect of relative velocity (**c**). The relative velocity is given in units of the root-mean-square value. For the gas fraction, the colors correspond to the logarithm of the fraction normalized by the mean values, 0.0012 and 0.0021 for the case with and without the velocity effect, respectively; for ease of comparison, the scale in each plot ranges from 1/5 to 5 times the mean. In each panel, we indicate the scale of 130 comoving Mpc, which corresponds to the large-scale peak in the 21-cm power spectrum (see Fig. 4). The no-velocity gas fraction map is a biased version of the density map, while the velocity effect increases the large-scale power and the map’s contrast, producing larger, emptier voids.

Figure 2: The effect of relative velocity on the distribution of star-forming halos at $z = 40$.

The gas fraction in star-forming halos in the same two-dimensional slice as in Fig. 1 but at $z = 40$, with (**a**) and without (**b**) the relative velocity effect. The colors correspond to the logarithm of the gas fraction normalized by the mean values, 1.5×10^{-8} and 1.1×10^{-7} for the case with and without the relative velocity effect, respectively. The trends seen at $z = 20$ with the velocity effect are much stronger at $z = 40$, with 100 Mpc scales characterized by nearly isolated star-forming concentrations surrounded by deep voids; this implies a much more complex stellar feedback history, with the star-forming centers affected long before the voids.

Figure 3: The effect of relative velocity on the 21-cm brightness temperature at $z = 20$.

The 21-cm brightness temperature (in units of mK) in the same two-dimensional slice as in Fig. 1 at $z = 20$ with (**a**) and without (**b**) the relative velocity effect. For ease of comparison,

both plots use a common scale that ranges from -79 to +58 mK; the no-velocity case is smoother and does not reach below -42 mK.

Figure 4: The signature of relative velocity in the 21-cm power spectrum at $z = 20$. Power spectrum of the 21-cm brightness temperature fluctuations versus wavenumber, at the peak of the X-ray heating transition at $z = 20$. We show the prediction for the case of a late LW transition for which the LW feedback is still negligible at $z = 20$ (blue solid curve); this no-feedback case shows a strong effect of the velocities. This is well above the projected $1\text{-}\sigma$ telescope sensitivity²⁹ (green dashed curve) based on 1000-hour observations with an instrument like the Murchison Wide-field Array or the Low Frequency Array but designed to operate at 50–100 MHz, where we include an estimated degradation factor due to foreground removal³⁰ (see Supplementary Information section S4 for details). Future experiments like the Square Kilometer Array should reach a better sensitivity by an order of magnitude²⁹. We also show the prediction for an early LW transition that has already saturated by $z = 20$ (purple solid curve), in which case the power spectrum is essentially unaffected by the velocities. These two feedback cases bracket the possible range. We show for comparison the previous expectation for the no feedback case, without the velocity effect (red dotted curve). The velocity effect makes it significantly easier to detect the signal, and also creates a clear signature by flattening the power spectrum and increasing the prominence of the BAOs (which are more strongly imprinted in the velocity than in the density fluctuations). Each plotted result is the mean of 20 realizations of our full box (s.d. error bars are shown in the main case). In this plot we have fixed the heating transition at $z = 20$ for easy comparison among the various cases. In cases with effective feedback, the heating transition as well as the main portion of the feedback itself will be delayed to somewhat lower redshift, making the signal more easily observable.

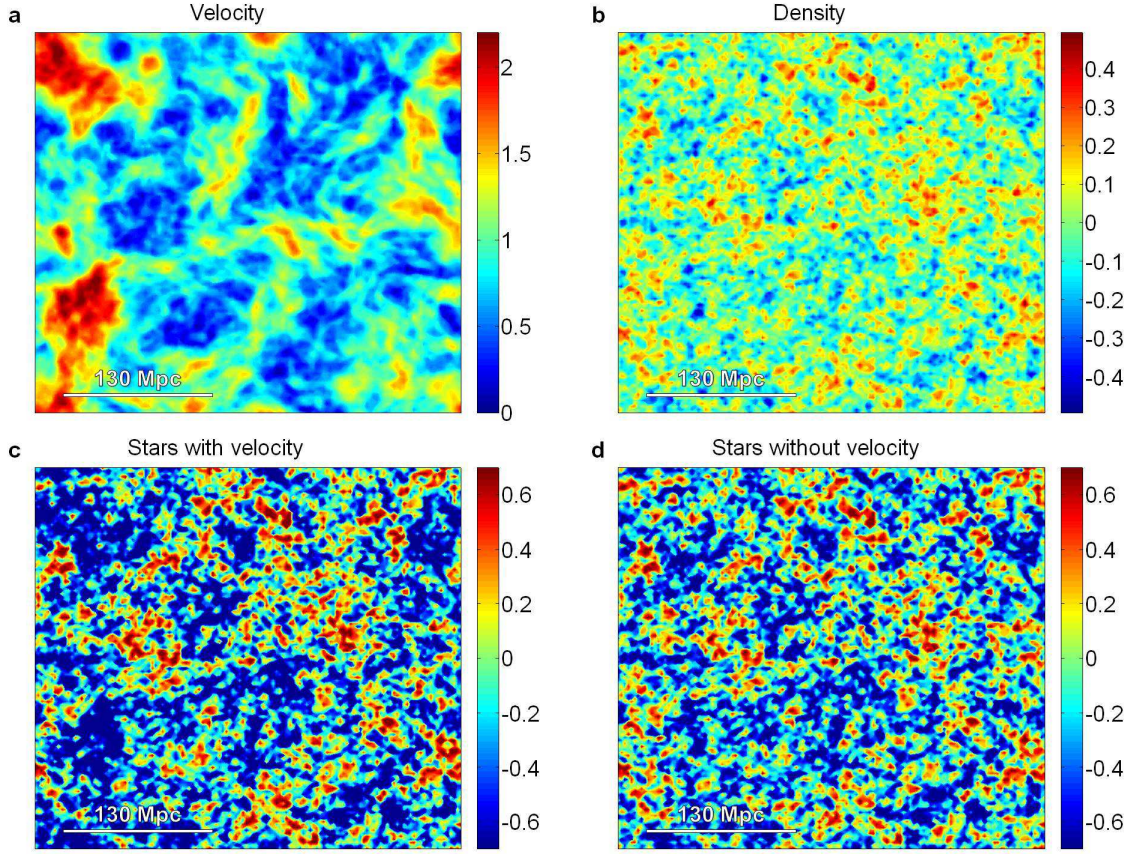


Figure 1: **The effect of relative velocity on the distribution of star-forming halos at $z = 20$.**

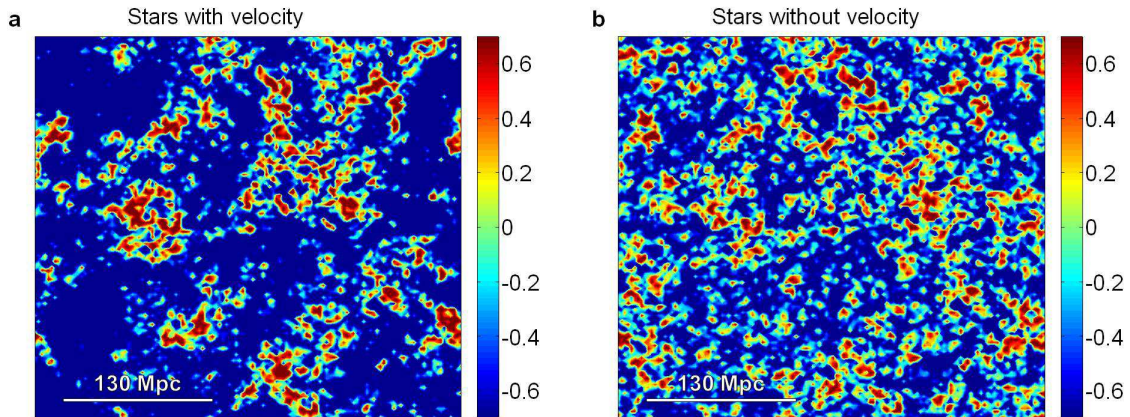


Figure 2: **The effect of relative velocity on the distribution of star-forming halos at $z = 40$.**

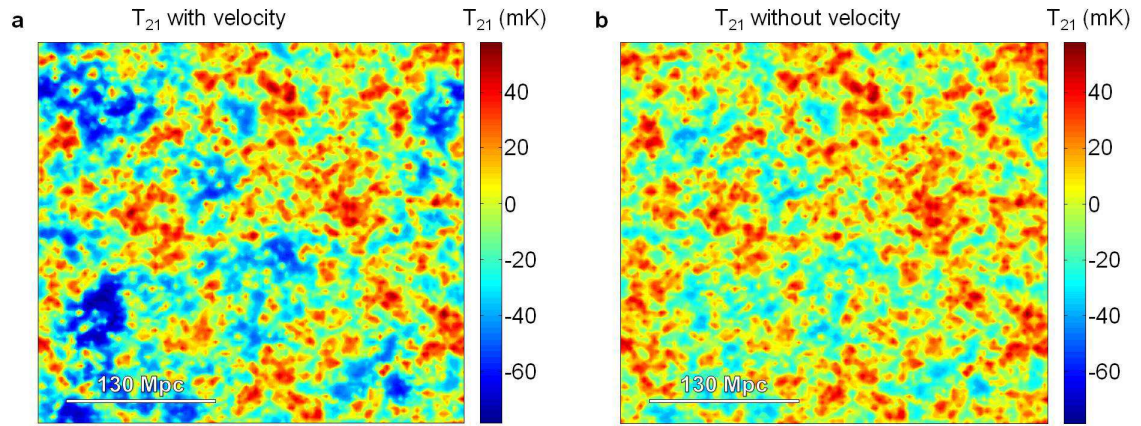


Figure 3: The effect of relative velocity on the 21-cm brightness temperature at $z = 20$.

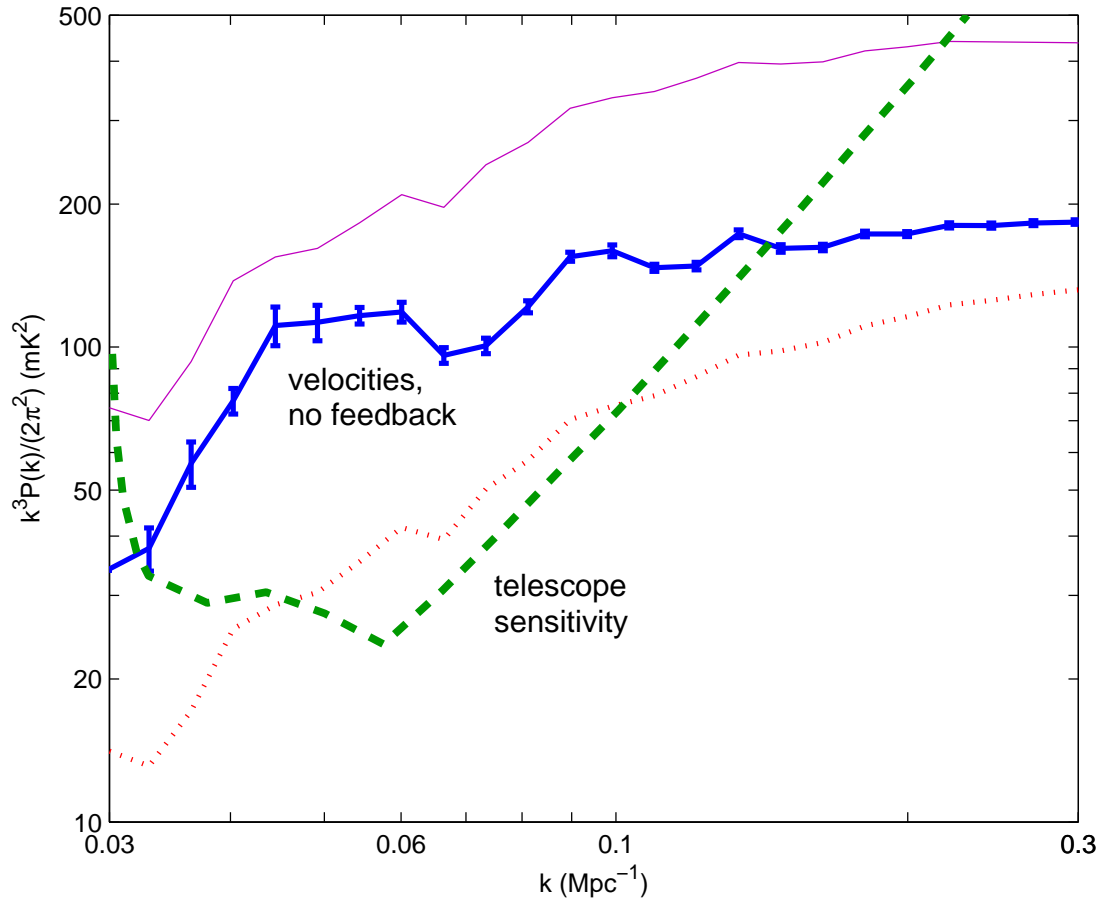


Figure 4: **The signature of relative velocity in the 21-cm power spectrum at $z = 20$.**

Supplementary Information

S1. Description of the simulation code

We developed our own code that implements a hybrid method to produce instances of the expected three-dimensional distribution of the first stars. We first used the known statistical properties of the initial density and velocity perturbations to generate a realistic sample universe on large, linear scales. Specifically, we assumed Gaussian initial conditions and adopted the initial power spectrum corresponding to the currently best-measured cosmological parameters³¹. In a cubic volume consisting of 128^3 cells (each 3 comoving Mpc on a side), we generated as in our previous work¹ a random realization, including the appropriate correlations, of the initial overdensity and relative baryon-dark matter velocity in each cell (with periodic boundary conditions). These values are easily computed at any redshift as long as the scales are sufficiently large to use linear perturbation theory. We then computed analytically the gas fraction in star-forming halos in each cell as a function of these two variables and the redshift, as in our previous papers. Specifically, this gas has density¹³

$$\rho_{\text{gas}} = \int_{M_{\text{cool}}}^{\infty} \frac{dn}{dM} M_{\text{gas}}(M) dM, \quad (1)$$

where dn/dM is the comoving abundance of halos of mass M (i.e., n is the comoving number density), $M_{\text{gas}}(M)$ is the gas mass inside a halo of total mass M , and M_{cool} is the minimum halo mass in which the gas can cool efficiently and form stars. In this calculation (whose results are illustrated in Figs. 1 and 2) we included three separate effects of the relative velocity on star formation¹⁴, namely the effect on M_{cool} , on dn/dM , and on $M_{\text{gas}}(M)$ (see also section S2). The stellar density equals ρ_{gas} multiplied by the star-formation efficiency.

We then used this information to determine the X-ray heating rate in each cell as follows. At each redshift, we smoothed the stellar density field in shells around each cell, by filtering it (using fast Fourier transforms) with two position-space top-hat filters of different radii and

taking the difference. We assumed the flux of X-ray photons emitted from each shell to be proportional to the star formation rate, which is in turn proportional to the time derivative of ρ_{gas} . We assumed an X-ray efficiency of 1.75×10^{57} photons per solar mass in stars (1.15×10^{57} for the case with no streaming velocity) produced above the minimum energy (assumed to be 200 eV) that allows the photons to escape from the galaxy. The efficiency in each case was chosen so as to get the peak of the cosmic heating transition at $z = 20$, i.e., so that the mean kinetic gas temperature equals the cosmic microwave background (CMB) temperature at that redshift. The actual X-ray efficiency of high-redshift galaxies is highly uncertain, but 10^{57} photons per solar mass along with our adopted power-law spectrum corresponds to observed starbursts at low redshifts⁴. We then computed the heating by integrating over all the shells seen by each cell, as in the 21CMFAST code¹⁷. In this integral, the radiative contribution of each cell to a given central cell was computed analytically at the time-delayed redshift seen by the central cell, using a pre-computed interpolation grid of star formation versus overdensity, streaming velocity, and redshift. We varied the number and thickness of shells to check for convergence. To estimate the optical depth, we assumed a uniform density and a neutral inter-galactic medium, but did not make a crude step-function approximation as in 21CMFAST. We used photoionization cross sections and energy deposition fractions from atomic physics calculations^{32,33}.

Given the X-ray heating rate versus redshift at each cell, we integrated as in 21CMFAST to get the gas temperature as a function of time. We interpolated the heating rate between the redshifts where it was explicitly computed, and varied the number of redshifts to ensure convergence. We then assumed that the spin temperature and the gas temperature are coupled to compute the 21cm signal, i.e., that the Lyman- α coupling has already saturated by $z = 20$, as expected (see section S3). Except for the differences noted, in the heating portion of the code we followed 21CMFAST and adopted their fiducial parameters, such as a 10% star-formation efficiency. However, our source distribution was substantially different since they

did not include the effect of the streaming velocity. Since we focused on the era well before the peak of cosmic reionization, we did not calculate ionization due to ultra-violet or X-ray radiation. The kinetic temperature T_k and overdensity δ of the gas in each cell gave us the 21-cm brightness temperature (relative to the CMB temperature T_{CMB})³

$$\delta T_b = 40(1 + \delta) \left(1 - \frac{T_{\text{CMB}}}{T_k}\right) \sqrt{\frac{1+z}{21}} \text{ mK} , \quad (2)$$

and thus Figs. 3 and 4. Finally, for Fig. S1 (in section S3) we added a calculation of the inhomogeneous Lyman-Werner flux¹⁶ within the box using the halo distribution in the box similarly to our calculation of the inhomogeneous X-ray heating rate.

S2. Comparison with previous work

In this section we briefly summarize previous work on the streaming velocity and note the differences with our work.

It is now known that the relative motion between the baryons and dark matter has three effects on halos: (1) suppressed halo numbers, i.e., the abundance of halos as a function of total mass M and redshift z ; (2) suppressed gas content of each halo, i.e., the gas mass within a halo of a given M and z ; and (3) boosted minimum halo mass needed for cooling, i.e., the minimum total mass M of halos at each redshift z in which catastrophic collapse due to cooling, and thus star formation, can occur. Note that this separation into three distinct effects is natural within our model (see Eq. 1 in section S1), but this does not preclude the possibility that they are physically correlated or mutually dependent.

The original paper in which the importance of the relative motion was discovered¹ included only the impact on the halo abundance (effect #1). This was sufficient for them to deduce the important implication of enhanced large-scale fluctuations, but quantitatively the effect was underestimated. Also, their calculations had a number of simplifying assumptions: they calculated the baryon perturbations under the approximation of a uniform sound speed (which has a big

impact on the no-streaming-velocity case which is still relevant in regions where the streaming velocity is low), and used the old (and relatively inaccurate) Press-Schechter halo mass function.

The effect of the relative velocity on suppressing the gas content of halos (effect #2) was the next to be demonstrated². These authors predicted significant fluctuations on large scales, with prominent baryon acoustic oscillations. However, they made a number of simplifying approximations (detailed previously¹⁴). Most important were two limitations: they included only effect #2 (i.e., they left out the already-known #1), and they scaled star formation according to the total gas content in halos, without including a cooling criterion for star formation. The vast majority of the gas is in minihalos that cannot cool, and because of their low circular velocities their ability to collect baryons is much more affected by the streaming velocity than the star-forming halos. Even more importantly, they only considered fluctuations in the Lyman- α radiation, which yielded a prediction at $z = 20$ of a large-scale power spectrum peak of amplitude 5 mK^2 (see their Fig. 4). In comparison, in our Fig. 4 the large-scale peak (due to X-ray heating fluctuations) is more than 20 times higher, at around 110 mK^2 . We also note that they assumed a particularly low Lyman- α efficiency in order to get significant Lyman- α fluctuations at a redshift as low as 20, while such fluctuations are actually expected to be significant only at a much higher redshift (see section S3 below), where the observational noise is much higher.

In a subsequent paper¹³ we calculated the consequences of the combination of effects #1 and #2 on the distribution of star-forming halos as well as on star-less gas minihalos. At this point there were indications from numerical simulations^{5,7,8} that the minimum halo mass needed for cooling also changed as a result of the streaming velocity (effect #3). Recently, numerical simulations have also been used for a more robust and detailed look at effect #1⁶. We have studied the three effects on halos and shown¹⁴ that the effect on star-forming halos, and thus also on the various radiation fields, is mainly due to effects #1 and #3, while the smaller gas

minihalos are mainly affected by effects #1 and #2.

In summary, the existence and correct determination of the various effects of the streaming velocity on star formation have been worked out gradually. The present paper fully incorporates that understanding in order to study the implications for X-ray heating fluctuations, resulting in a solid prediction of strong large-scale 21-cm fluctuations around redshift 20.

S3. Timing of feedback transitions

In the main text, we noted that three radiative transitions are expected to occur at high redshift: Lyman- α coupling, X-ray heating, and Lyman-Werner suppression. In our results in Fig. 4, we assumed that Lyman- α coupling occurs early, while the other two transitions occur later and may overlap. In this section we explain why this relative timing of the feedback transitions is expected.

It has been previously shown⁴ that the heating transition is expected to occur significantly later than Lyman- α coupling. Specifically, the scenarios considered by these authors showed a clear period of observable 21-cm absorption before heating (see their Fig. 1). They, however, considered scenarios in which only large (atomic cooling) halos are included. In our calculations, we included also the highly abundant molecular-cooling halos, and these help produce the various transitions at higher redshifts, and with a larger gap between the Lyman- α coupling and the heating transition. Specifically, we find that in our model the coupling transition (which is also when Lyman- α fluctuations are maximal) is expected to occur at redshift 27.8 (compared to 30.1 without the streaming velocity effect). Note that the result without velocities is in good agreement with a similar previous calculation¹⁶. For the heating transition, we adopted redshift 20 in the paper, but allowing for a range of uncertainty of an order of magnitude in the X-ray efficiency (centered around the efficiency of observed starbursts) gives a transition redshift within $z = 17 - 21$, well after the peak of the Lyman- α coupling transition (the range is $z = 17 - 23$ without the velocity effect).

The third (LW) transition should occur significantly later than previously estimated in the literature. Both simulations of individual halos³⁵ and full cosmological simulations^{34,36,37} that investigated halo formation under the influence of an external LW background used an artificially input *fixed* LW flux during the entire halo formation process. In reality the LW flux rises exponentially with time (along with the cosmic star formation rate) at high redshifts. Taking the final, highest value reached by the LW flux when the halo forms, and assuming that this value had been there from the beginning, greatly overestimates the effect of the LW feedback. In fact, a change in LW flux takes some time to affect the halo. The flux changes the formation rate of molecular hydrogen, but it then takes some time for this to affect the collapse. For instance, if the halo core has already cooled and is collapsing to a star, changing the LW flux will not suddenly stop or reverse the collapse. Another indication for the gradual process involved is that the simulation results can be approximately matched³⁴ by comparing the cooling time in halo cores to the Hubble time (which is a relatively long timescale). Thus, estimates^{35,16} of the LW feedback based on the LW flux at halo virialization overestimate the transition redshift.

In order to better estimate the effect of LW feedback, we have calculated the mean LW intensity in our simulated volume, and compared it to a critical threshold for significant suppression of halos. We adopt a threshold intensity of $J = 10^{-22} \text{ erg s}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-2} \text{ Hz}^{-1} \text{ sr}^{-1}$ as defining the center of the LW transition. The above-mentioned cosmological simulations indicate that at this intensity, the minimum halo mass for cooling (in the absence of streaming velocities) is raised to $\sim 2 \times 10^6 M_\odot$ due to the LW feedback. This is a useful fiducial mass scale, roughly intermediate (logarithmically) between the cooling masses obtained with no LW flux or with saturated LW flux, and characteristic of the scale at which the streaming velocity effect is significantly but not overwhelmingly suppressed (e.g., the velocity effect on the halo abundance is maximized at this mass scale¹). Thus, at this level of LW suppression we would expect the 21-cm power spectrum (in the case of an X-ray heating transition at $z = 20$) to be approximately the average

of the two top curves in Fig. 4. Note that even in the case of a fully saturated LW feedback, a minor (5 – 10%) effect remains for the velocities on the 21-cm power spectrum.

A key point is that the critical feedback threshold must be compared not to the LW intensity when the halo virializes, but to its typical or average value during the entire process of halo formation. Another important feature is that the LW transition is very gradual. Adopting a reasonable range of uncertainty, we find (Fig. S1) that the LW transition, for our adopted parameters, should be centered somewhere in the range $z = 21 - 28$, with its main portion extending over a $\Delta z \sim 6 - 8$ (note that the center is expected in the range $z = 24 - 31$ without the velocity effect). In fact, the feedback itself will delay the heating transition to lower redshift, so that in general we expect redshift 20 to show a significant velocity signature.

We conclude that the Lyman- α transition occurs well before the X-ray heating transition, while the latter likely overlaps in redshift with the LW transition. Note that the prediction for the Lyman- α transition is more secure (for a given star formation efficiency) than the others, since the Lyman- α radiation comes directly from stars (unlike the more uncertain X-ray emission associated with stellar remnants), and it directly affects the low-density intergalactic gas (unlike the more uncertain LW feedback which occurs within the non-linear cores of collapsing halos). In particular, the LW feedback may be further delayed by complex local feedback effects that can oppose the suppression effect^{39,40}.

S4. Observational considerations

In the main text we argued that there are good prospects for observing the 21-cm power spectrum that we predict at redshift 20. In this section we briefly elaborate on the experimental sensitivity that we adopted and on the observational challenges.

In Fig. 4 we showed the projected $1-\sigma$ sensitivity of one-year observations with an instrument like the first-generation MWA and LOFAR experiments. Specifically, we adopted the projected sensitivity of the MWA from a detailed analysis of the sensitivity to the power spec-

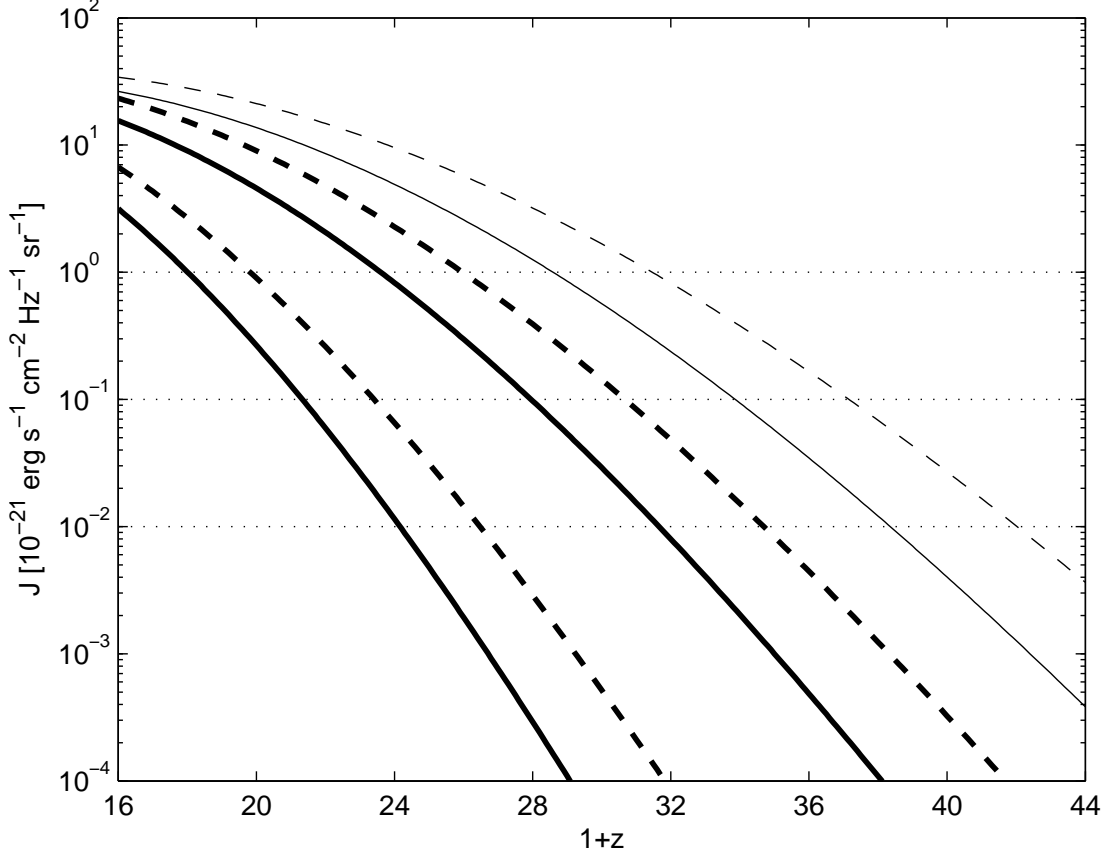


Figure S1: **The expected timing of the Lyman-Werner feedback.** We show the mean Lyman-Werner intensity J in our simulation box as a function of redshift, with (solid) and without (dashed) the relative velocity effect. In each case, we show the actual intensity (top, thin curve), and a range of effective intensities for halo feedback (bottom, thick curves). Specifically, for the effective intensity we adopt the intensity that was in place at the midpoint of halo formation. This is a reasonable estimate of the characteristic value during halo formation since, during the formation process, half the time J was below this value, and half the time above it. We estimate the midpoint of halo formation (in terms of cosmic age) based on the standard spherical collapse model³⁸. To obtain a plausible range of uncertainty, we consider the start of halo formation to be either the beginning of the universe, or the start of the actual collapse (i.e., the moment of turnaround); the former yields an earlier characteristic time and corresponds to the bottom curve in each case. Also shown (horizontal lines) are critical values of LW intensity (to be compared with the effective intensities) that correspond to the central portion of the LW transition, during which the minimum halo mass for cooling (in the absence of streaming velocities) is raised by LW feedback to³⁶ $8 \times 10^5 M_\odot$, $2 \times 10^6 M_\odot$, and $5 \times 10^6 M_\odot$, respectively.

trum²⁹. The parameters of the actual instruments have changed somewhat, but in any case no current instrument is designed for observations at $z = 20$; we considered instruments in the same class of capabilities but designed to operate at 50–100 MHz. Specifically, we assumed an instrument with 500 antennas, a field of view of 800 deg², and an effective collecting area at $z = 20$ of 23,000 m², and scaled the noise power spectrum from redshift 12 to redshift 20 up by a factor of 12 [proportional to $(1 + z)^{5.2}$] due to the brighter foreground²⁹. The sensitivity in Fig. 4 is calculated for an 8 MHz band and bin sizes of $\Delta k = 0.5k$. It assumes a 1000 hr integration in a single field of view, i.e., it allows for a selection (out of an 8800 hr year) of night-time observations with favorable conditions.

An instrument like LOFAR – with 64 antennas, a field of view of 50 deg², and a collecting area at $z = 20$ of 190,000 m² – should have a slightly better power spectrum sensitivity, i.e., lower noise by about a factor of two²⁹. A second-generation instrument should reach a substantially better sensitivity, e.g., by an order of magnitude for the SKA or a 5000-antenna MWA²⁹.

A possible concern, especially with large-scale modes in the 21-cm signal, is the degeneracy with the foregrounds. At each point on the sky, or at each point in the Fourier (u, v) -plane, the intensity spectrum of synchrotron and free-free foregrounds is smooth. The fitting and removal of these foregrounds also removes some of the signal at small radial wavenumbers k_{\parallel} , which means that the power spectrum of the cosmological 21-cm signal at sufficiently small k is not measurable.

The range of wavenumbers k that are affected by foregrounds follows from geometrical considerations as well as the complexity of the foreground model that must be removed. The first issue is that template projection removes a range of $k_{\parallel} = k \cos \theta$ rather than a range of k , where θ is the angle between the wave vector and the line of sight. Therefore if we must cut at some $k_{\parallel, \min}$ then all values of $k < k_{\parallel, \min}$ are rejected, and at larger values of k a fraction

$1 - k_{\parallel,\text{min}}/k$ survive. The foreground model consists of a smooth function such as a low-order polynomial (as well as Galactic radio recombination lines confined to specific frequencies⁴¹).

The relation between the foreground model complexity and the range of suppressed k_{\parallel} is more complex³⁰. The simplest argument to derive k_{\parallel} is via mode counting: at each pixel in the (u, v) -plane of size $\Delta u \Delta v = \Omega^{-1}$ (where Ω is the solid angle of the survey), if one removes a polynomial of order $N - 1$ (i.e., with N independent coefficients) then one has removed the lowest N radial modes. Since the number of modes per unit radial wavenumber (including both positive and negative k_{\parallel}) is $\Delta r/(2\pi)$, where Δr is the radial width of the survey, mode-counting would suggest that radial wavenumbers from $-k_{\parallel,\text{min}} < k < k_{\parallel,\text{min}}$ are lost in the projection, giving $k_{\parallel,\text{min}} = \pi N/\Delta r$. Despite its simplicity, the mode-counting argument holds up well against much more detailed studies. A good example¹¹ is a simulated foreground subtraction in the frequency range 142–174 MHz, using the subtraction of a cubic polynomial ($N = 4$). This corresponds to a radial shell of width $\Delta r = 551$ Mpc. Mode-counting suggests that subtraction of real signal should become an issue at $k_{\parallel,\text{min}} = 0.023 \text{ Mpc}^{-1}$, and in fact Fig. 13 of these authors¹¹ shows that the 21-cm signal remains intact over the entire range of scales investigated ($0.03\text{--}1.0 \text{ Mpc}^{-1}$). Larger values of $k_{\parallel,\text{min}}$ occur in calculations with narrower bandwidths⁴².

For our $z = 20$ case, assuming a bandwidth of 60–80 MHz, the same mode-counting argument leads to $k_{\parallel,\text{min}} = 0.03 \text{ Mpc}^{-1}$ for $N = 5$. Thus we would expect that if the foregrounds can be described by the lowest 5 modes over a factor of 1.33 in frequency, that they are distinguishable from our signal. In Fig. 4 we have included the estimated degradation of the observational sensitivity for these parameters, with a $1/\sqrt{1 - k_{\parallel,\text{min}}/k}$ factor.

This of course leaves open the issue of how many foreground modes actually need to be removed. A previous study³⁰ suggests 3–4 modes might be sufficient, but they considered higher frequencies (where the foreground:signal ratio is smaller) and used principal components of their foreground spectra (which given their assumptions must work better than polynomials,

although after rescaling by an overall power law their eigenfunctions are – unsurprisingly – very similar to polynomials). Fortunately, if the foreground spectrum is analytic (as expected for synchrotron and free-free emission), polynomial fits are expected to converge exponentially fast to the true foreground spectrum as N is increased. The true value of N that will be required for future 21 cm experiments (and hence the required $k_{\parallel, \text{min}}$) will likely be determined by how well such smooth functions can really describe the foreground.

The most difficult part of the foreground removal has been the calibration problem: even if the foreground frequency spectrum is smooth, frequency-dependent calibration errors will beat against the bright foreground and produce spurious frequency-dependent fluctuations. The problem is made more difficult by the nature of interferometry: a baseline measuring a particular Fourier mode in the (u, v) -plane at one frequency ν actually measures a different Fourier mode, $(\nu'/\nu)(u, v)$, at a neighboring ν' . Thus each pixel in (u, v) -space is actually made up from different pairs of antennas as the frequency varies, which means that the relative calibration of the gains and beams of all antennas must be known very accurately^{11,43,44}. Note that the relevant gain and beam are those projected onto the sky, including phase and (of particular importance at lower frequencies) amplitude shifts induced by the ionosphere. The polarization calibration is also important: Faraday rotation is expected to produce rapidly varying structure in the polarized Stokes parameters Q and U of the Galactic synchrotron radiation, which has been observed at high Galactic latitudes at frequencies as low as 150 MHz⁴⁵ (albeit with some nondetections⁴⁶, which may be the result of lower sensitivity). The proper extrapolation of this signal to the $z \sim 20$ band is not clear, as it depends in detail on the small-scale structure of the emitting and rotating regions, but it seems likely that leakage into the Stokes I map will need to be carefully controlled. The current ($z \sim 10$) 21-cm experiments are working to achieve the required accuracy in calibration and it is hoped that they will succeed in laying the groundwork for similar efforts at higher redshift.

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